



Discover Britain

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Devolution – The transfer of power or authority from a central government to a local government - as defined by the Random House College dictionary.

But what does devolution mean for Britain?

This is a difficult and complex question, but let me try to explain what it means. British papers and TV programmes have covered extensively the two votes which have recently taken place in Scotland and Wales for devolution. The two votes mean different things.

Scotland

The vote in Scotland had two elements - you may have read about yes/yes, yes/no, no/yes and no/no. The first part was a vote for a Scottish Assembly to be responsible for the fiscal budget (currently around £14 million per annum) and the second part was a vote to allow the Assembly to implement tax variations within limits.

There is a fear that a Scottish Assembly may use their powers to raise taxes even higher, but in fact their powers will be quite limited - they will only be able to vary taxation. For example, they will not be able to raise Value Added Tax - only reduce it. They will be able to achieve revenue gains through Income Tax, but then only up to a maximum of two pence to the pound.

You may have noticed that the vote took place on the 700th anniversary of William Wallace's ("Braveheart") victory over the English at the Battle of Stirling Bridge - some suggest to give home rule its maximum appeal.

Scotland produces a huge amount of revenue from its oil industry and could be self-sufficient. Wales has never generated its own revenue to this extent and has always been reliant on a budget from Westminster, the seat of British government.



Wales

In Wales the vote was purely for a Welsh Assembly to manage the budget for Wales (currently around £7 million per annum).

The major difference between Scotland and Wales is that Wales has never had its own parliament like Scotland. Scotland also has its own legal system, which Wales does not.

Results

A significant factor between the two countries was the number of people who voted in each ballot. In Scotland 60.2 percent of the eligible electorate turned out to vote compared to 50.1 percent in Wales. In Scotland the margin for devolution was 74.3 percent to 25.7 percent and in Wales the margin was 50.3 percent to 49.7 percent.

The proportion of Welsh people voting for an assembly was only 25.2 per cent and in Scotland it was 44.7 per cent.

The outcome also shows the Welsh to be deeply divided, with half the 22 local authorities (district councils) voting for devolution and half the other way. In contrast, in Scotland every local authority backed devolution.

When will it happen?

The recent voting is only the first step to devolution, and there are many aspects to be discussed and argued over. Also, much of the legislation needs to be approved by Westminster. If all this happens, the two Assemblies will come into effect in 1999.

The current Scottish and Welsh offices -- headed by Westminster-appointed people - will be disbanded in favour of assemblies. In Scotland there will be 129 members, 56 of whom will be elected by proportional representation. It is predicted that no one party will have an overall majority. In Wales there will be 60 members, 40 elected members and 20 appointees from party lists based on proportional representation.

Will England want to regionalise, too?

A formula determining the allocation of public spending agreed to in 1978 currently gives Scotland and Wales 25 percent more cash per head than England, and some Members of Parliament predict there will be demands in England for a more equitable share once Scotland runs its own budget. Jack Straw, home secretary, has proposed that changes for England should not be considered until the next general election, although already there has been much speculation about the future.

British or English?

Fifty years ago, if you asked an English person what their nationality was, they would probably have told you they were British, but if you asked the same question of a Welsh or Scottish person they would have told you they were Welsh or Scottish, respectively. Young English people are changing too, and in a recent survey of teenagers, two-thirds saw themselves as English rather than British.